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ABSTRACT

Teachers have allowed the social studies and science areas of instruction to become isolated from vibrant language arts skills, resulting in deficiencies in reading and writing skills within the different content areas. An 8- to 10-week biography unit was developed for a fourth-grade social studies course in an attempt to give students a stronger personal connection with social studies. Such a personal involvement fosters self-expression, the ability to make inferences and think critically, and the promotion of student interest and involvement in learning. A major challenge in teaching biographical research is finding some way of organizing a vast amount of material. This can be done by using the "snapshot" approach, which emphasizes a common theme among the materials studied. The choice for a first biographical subject demanded some emotional involvement, suggesting Martin Luther King, Jr. Reading aloud from various biographies, class and small group discussion, and sharing questions and feelings about the material were the main activities. Student groups were asked to select eight important events in King's life and try to determine a common bond among all of them. The next step in the unit involved having each student choose a person to research on his/her own. Similar activities followed, resulting in some excellent work, as a student sample about Harriet Tubman demonstrates. In short, such a biography unit develops language skills, a knowledge of narrative, and invites critical thinking and analysis. (HB)

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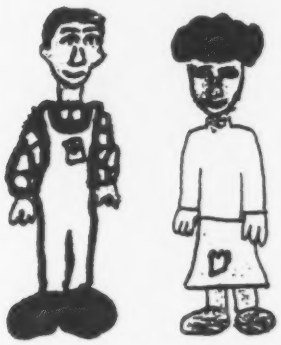

Harriet Tubman was born in 1820. When she was about three years old, they sent her to deliver notes. If she didn't get back quick enough, she would be whipped. When she was six years old, she was sent to go to work at a house.

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People From the Past: Writing Biographies

by

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PEOPLE FROM THE PAST: WRITING BIOGRAPHIES

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As a teacher of intermediate grades over the past 13 years, I have come to realize that students are not really motivated about content area classes. In fact, for the most part, students would tend to choose social studies as their least favorite subject. As I struggled to find reasons to help me understand why students felt this way, I started to wonder if teachers had inadvertently allowed this to happen by isolating the content areas from the language arts and by presenting social studies information only through the use of textbooks. We have somehow allowed the social studies and science areas to be little more than classes in which textbooks are read, literal questions are asked and answered, and multiple choice or true-false tests are given.

The consequence of this type of learning has resulted in problem areas for students within the area of reading and writing in the content areas. Richardson and Morgan (1990) argue the following points:

1. Students are unable to express themselves effectively in either oral or written form.
2. Students are unable to make inferences from their reading.
3. Students are unable to think critically about what they read.
4. Students do not recognize a large body of content knowledge which experts consider essential for informed readers.
5. Students do not prefer reading as a way to learn (pp. 5-6).

My experience teaching social studies confirms these observations. I feel a strong sense of urgency to try to change not only the attitude of students about content areas, but also the way in which the content areas are taught.

In this article I will describe one specific biography social studies unit that I developed. I hope to show that by using non-textbook reading as well as writing in the content areas, students will be able to make a stronger personal connection with social studies information, which in turn will empower them to express themselves, make inferences, think critically, process complex written material, recognize and draw on a large body of content knowledge, and prefer reading as a way to learn. It is also my hope and intent to convince educators that integrating children's literature, in particular, with content area texts will not only make the social studies curriculum more comprehensible and memorable, but will likely promote students' interest in and involvement with content material and thereby increase their learning (Brozo & Tomlinson, 1986).

A Biography Unit

In my fourth grade classroom during the 1991-92 school year, an eight to ten week biography unit was developed to help students understand people and how their contributions affect society. The method in which social studies is traditionally taught

asks that students simply be regurgitators of dates and places. I longed to see students actually relive history and experience the struggles, joys, and emotional pulls of the events and people which shaped where we are today. The use of an expository text does not allow children to relive history. The use of literature does, however. It was for this reason that I chose to use a biography approach which would integrate reading and writing into the social studies area.

I had four specific purposes for choosing biographies in my social studies curriculum. First, and perhaps most importantly, I felt I could capitalize on children's natural curiosity about people and the world around them. Secondly, I wanted students to sense how the world of today was shaped by the past and how human characters develop under pressure. Thirdly, I felt a strong need to expand the children's literature base with a genre that they would not normally choose on their own. Biographies are one type of genre which allow students to see how inseparable a life is from the times in which it is lived. Finally, in order for students to become effective lifelong learners, I believe they need to have a personal investment in that learning process. I found expository textbooks did not generate interest in human lives and their contributions to society. In order to motivate students' interests in this area, it was imperative to allow personal choice and ownership while using non-textbook materials.

I modeled the biography unit on Zarnowski's (1990) snapshot approach. One of the major challenges for someone who writes biographies is finding some way to organize all the data they collect. Using the snapshot approach, children search for common themes within the material they research. These threads help the biographer understand and give shape to a life story. The approach also makes use of the child's ability to visualize memorable events in the life of the person they choose to study. The picture or "snapshots" that are formed in the child's eye become a foundation for the other steps in the process of organizing materials–steps involving speaking, drawing, and writing. The Zarnowski snapshot approach best suited the needs of my fourth grade students by providing a unified structure and organizational framework which facilitated in-depth study of a biographical character.

Martin Luther King

As with any well-taught lesson, children need to see modeling before they can be expected to do something. My first task was to choose an important person that I wanted to share with the class. Emotional involvement with that person was of the utmost importance. My choice was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Since he was well-known in the sixties, I assumed that many students probably had heard of him but did not know many details about his life and contributions. I wanted to emphasize Martin Luther King's dream of equality through nonviolence. I also wanted all students to realize that dreams do come true and that they are necessary in order to reach a goal. Finally, I wanted to focus on differences, the idea that we all have various strengths and talents that make us different, but not better or worse.

Units on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spark very strong feelings in students. Most children cannot comprehend the fact that Afro-Americans were forced to enter stores through different doors, to use different drinking fountains and bathrooms, to talk in a different way to white people, and to give up their seat on a bus to a white person. Children ask why people act in such a racist way. They are deeply affected by Martin Luther King's life story. This experience helps them understand the importance of biography.

Students learned about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life by listening to me read several books about him. Each day during read aloud time, I read chapters from the following texts:

1. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Hunter, 1985)
2. *Martin Luther King, Jr.–A Picture Story* (Boone-Jones, 1968)
3. *The Life and Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Haskins, 1977)
4. *My First Martin Luther King Book* (Lillegard, 1987)

After listening to a book, students would share additional facts or comments that they had heard or read about Dr. King. The entire class then read *I Have a Dream* (Davidson, 1986). Seven literature groups consisting of four students each would then meet, decide on how many pages to read, and then read in their small group circle. After 20 minutes, they stopped reading and discussed the parts they had read. The group leader's responsibility was to make sure that everyone had the opportunity to participate and to lead the discussion according to the following questions:

1. Were there any words you didn't know or understand?
2. Were there any parts you didn't understand?
3. What did you notice in the story? (Every group member shares.)
4. What were your favorite parts (read aloud) or parts that you did not understand (read aloud)?
5. How did you feel about what you read today?

A 10 minute writing time that immediately followed allowed children to jot down important facts and feelings about what they had just read. Having the students narrow in on feeling, encouraged them to show empathy for others. After writing time each day, we met as a large group to chart various important events in Dr. King's life. Allowing charts to hang on our chalkboard throughout the unit encouraged children to reflect back and use them as a visual aid in the culmination of their final project.

Our class followed this basic procedure each day for approximately nine or ten days. Reading aloud, reading in literature groups, discussions each day, charting of important events, relating newspaper and TV reports, asking questions, sharing feelings, and tracking down facts allowed a vast amount of information to be absorbed by the children about Dr. King. Our next step was to organize all of that information and pull it together into a cohesive product, a snapshot of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was important that students used the same organizational model (with group support) for Dr. King's biography that they would use independently for their own biography.

The small literature groups met to brainstorm (either by using the charting we had done as a large group, which now completely covered the chalkboard, or charting they had done on their own) a list of eight events which they considered to be the most important in Dr. King's life. These events would later be made into "snapshots" for their group biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The next day, students drew a rectangle in the center of a large sheet of charting paper with eight lines extending out in a web (see Zarnowski, 1990, p. 42). These eight lines also had rectangles attached to them (see Figure 1). The eight rectangles were to contain important events from Dr. King's life. The inner rectangle would serve as a culmination summary statement or theme of Dr. King's life and would be filled in after the eight events were completed.

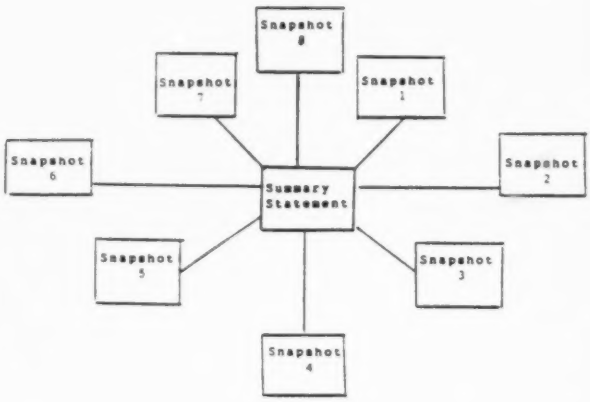


Figure 1. Form for arranging a "snapshot" biography

After the eight events were charted, each group member chose two of the events to make into a "snapshot." This "snapshot" included a picture of the event and a paragraph describing the event. I modeled the following sample paragraph by taking a student-prompted main idea and asking others for supporting details. The main idea shared was *Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech*. I then asked students for details about this main idea. I demonstrated the importance of getting all my ideas down on paper first. The following supporting details were shared by students as I charted them:

3 **Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream was that his children wouldn't be judged by the color of their skin.**

1 **He gave his famous speech in Washington, DC, in front of the Washington Monument.**

2 **250,000 people came, both black and white.**

5 **At the end, two total strangers, a white and a black, hugged each other.**

6 **Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech helped people understand each other and their freedoms and equalities.**

4 **Martin Luther King, Jr. hoped that people would be judged by what's inside, not what's outside.**

Next I asked students to review the details and help me to number them in the order in which they occurred. The numbers they shared are written at the beginning of each statement.

Our next step was to compose a paragraph dealing with the main idea and supporting details shared by the class. Students shared their ideas and the following paragraph was developed as a result:

Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. Two hundred fifty thousand people, both black and white, gathered in front of the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, to hear his famous speech. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream was that his children wouldn't be judged by the color of their skin but by what's inside their heart and soul. Two total strangers, a black and a white, hugged each other after hearing his speech. It was truly his best speech as it helped people understand the importance of freedom and equality for all.

After we composed the paragraph together, we went back to edit, checking for spelling and punctuation by circling areas of concern with a colored marker. I asked

students to help me out by finding areas that didn't sound right (sentence structure), words that were misspelled, and places where I had used the wrong punctuation marks. Allowing children to find a teacher's mistakes and help to correct them insures that they will be self-confident about proofreading others' work. It is of the utmost importance for the teacher to play up this role and allow the children to see that we all make mistakes and need the help of proofreading and encouragement of others during this cooperative venture.

Each student was then given a 12 x 18 sheet of white paper for his/her rough draft. I allowed students the option of working together and doing four "snapshots" or working on two by themselves. The "snapshot" had to contain as much detail as possible and a feeling statement about their event. The finished product would then be used to assess their emotional involvement with, and empathy for, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They spent the remainder of work time on their rough draft "snapshots" and self-editing.

The next two or three days students partnered up with two other students in the class and shared their rough drafts. One student read aloud her "snapshot" while the other two people listened for sentences making sense, feeling statements, and paragraph cohesiveness. They also helped to proofread for spelling or punctuation changes. If they were unsure of correct spelling they circled the word and then went back to a reference to find the correct spelling.

When at least two other people had proofread the rough draft and signed their name in order to identify themselves as a proofreader, the rough draft was then shared orally with me. I supported their hard work and effort by finding positive aspects of rough drafts. I encouraged some students to expand on their paragraphs by adding more details or more of their own feelings.

Using a large piece of tagboard, they worked on their final copy. When final copies were completed, the literature groups met to arrange all the "snapshots" in their correct chronological order and number the pages for display. Next they met on the floor as a large group to share their work. Each person in the group shared his/her "snapshot" of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The finished biographies were hung up in the hallway.

I feel the framework of the "snapshot" approach allowed the students to feel successful and helped to build their self-esteem. All students felt really good about their completed project. The risks taken were minimal because they always had the support and encouragement of the group. Those students who were a little uncomfortable simply had the option of working with someone else from their group. I felt really good about this project as it provided students with a strong background and understanding of the process involved with writing their own biography. It helped form a framework in their own mind of the organization and coherence necessary for the next step–choosing a famous person and writing a biography of that person.

Biography of Choice

The next step in our biography unit involved students choosing a person to research on their own. Each child was given the opportunity to make his/her own choice, thus empowering him/her and making that choice meaningful. We brainstormed the names of different people about whom children might be interested in researching. We also visited the biography section in our library and briefly talked about a hundred or so possibilities. Our large discussion that

first day touched on the idea of literature available on famous people who are still living. The group consensus was that more information would probably be found on deceased people, but anyone could, in fact, choose a person who was alive.

Our next job was to find at least two sources of information on each of these famous people. Our classroom set of encyclopedias was one source that we could use for checking particular facts and dates, along with books from our library. Various students volunteered to check at the public library or at their own personal home libraries for other possible sources of information.

A strong intrinsic purpose was set as students had their own questions about their particular famous person. They longed to search for those answers. Once they found at least one book on their person, they wanted to sit down and read right away. We read for the rest of the literature time that day.

The next day our large group discussion was buzzing. Children had found more books and were willing and anxious to loan them out to others. Some students decided to switch their person after spending time and not being able to find enough information to suit their needs.

We brainstormed a list of ideas for some types of facts they might want to include in their final biographies. These included when and where the person was born, whether or not the person was married or had children, what the person did to become famous, and when, where, and possibly how, they died. We discussed that these statements were facts and played a very important part in our final biography. I wanted to bring in the idea of empathy with, and for, our biographical character, so I referred back to Dr. King. I asked students to remember how they felt about the situations that surrounded his life. After allowing students to share those feelings, I charted two columns on chart paper, one labeled facts and the other labeled feelings. I explained to the children that after they had read today, they would be writing in their literature log using those two guidelines for their notes. I felt that students needed some direction in organizing the knowledge that they were absorbing through their reading. We used this format in our literature logs for two to four days depending on the student. Some felt comfortable with the guidelines while others wanted to just write facts. They said they would always be able to remember how they felt so they discontinued writing the feeling statements.

Another area of focus involved requiring the students to write the title and author of any books they read about their biographical person. I asked them to record this reference information on the back page of their literature log where it would always be handy. This mini-lesson was an introduction for students on the guidelines for citing sources and was charted and left hanging in the classroom throughout the unit.

We spent two and a half weeks reading books, writing in literature logs, and sharing facts and information about our biographical persons in both small and large groups. After two and a half weeks, most students were at the point of being ready and eager to write their own biographies.

The following day I asked the students to reread their literature logs. While reading, they were to choose seven to ten events that they felt were focal points in the life of their biographical character. They were to construct a web (see Figure 1) including these events. Our next step was to take each event and develop it into a paragraph, which in

turn would become one page in the finished book. Once again, I referred back to Dr. King as students remembered our mini-lesson on paragraphs.

As soon as students finished writing their paragraphs, they were then asked to self-edit their work. Words they felt were spelled incorrectly could be circled with a marker. Students were expected to refer back to the books they read about their character or to their literature logs in order to check for the correct spellings and make the necessary changes. Sentences that did not make sense or needed correct punctuation had to be changed. Students were familiar with editing as we had worked on it throughout the school year.

At this time, I started to pair up students who could proofread and edit with someone else who was also ready to do the same task. I required that each rough draft have two other student signatures who had proofread the work before I would conference with them. Once they were ready to conference with me on their final copy, they were to sign up on the conference sheet. At conference time, I met individually with each student. They read through their rough draft. If either one of us had concerns about sentence structure, paragraph cohesiveness, or punctuation, we discussed it at that time.

Children were then ready to start work on their final copy. We decided together, by using a model book, how many white sheets of paper needed to be sewn together. We sewed the sheets of paper down the middle and attached them to wallpaper covered cardboard for an actual book. I gave the students the choice of either handwriting or typing (or having a parent type) their final copy. If typing was chosen, the typewritten passages were then cut and rubber cemented into the final book whereas the handwriting could be directly written in the book. We spent time during the following days sharing and charting ideas for title pages, table of contents, bibliographic entries, and a page stating the reasons why each person chose the famous person they chose.

Books were completed intermittently over the next week and a half. Students who finished were more than willing to help out a friend by showing how to bind the book or giving ideas for sketches on each of the pages. The books were shared orally in small groups at a special author celebration. They were then placed in the library for other students to enjoy.

Harriet Tubman

Throughout the unit I enjoyed watching various students gain confidence in themselves and their particular ability, whether it be remembering facts, pulling together ideas, working on the sketches, proofreading, or printing the final copy. Each child experienced some type of developmental growth. Everyone had a special talent to share with the group.

I was also interested, however, in documenting how my students improved in social studies, reading, and writing as a result of this biography unit. I would like to share just a brief part of the biography Tony (a pseudonym) wrote on Harriet Tubman.

Tony uses an extensive and expressive vocabulary in order to convey a powerful message about Harriet Tubman. Descriptive phrases such as, "all of a sudden," "hurt so badly," and "it took quite awhile until she recovered" (see Figure 2) are some examples. Figure 3 shows Tony's use of descriptive verbs and adverbs such as "worked very hard," "always afraid," "never forget," "were torn apart," and "believed strongly." All of the

above examples suggest that Tony's extensive reading carried over into his word choices and style of writing.

It is interesting to note that Tony shares the name of another person, Nat Turner, who was also involved in the underground railroad (see Figure 4). For readers who are interested in this subject, Tony provided another source in which to find information, much like the professional biographies that he had read.

Tony, like all biographers, used several historical terms that were pertinent to Harriet Tubman's life. He shared information about the underground railroad including station masters, stations, and conductors (see Figure 5).

Figure 2

When Harriet was thirteen, she was at a grocery store. Then, all of a sudden, a black man dashed out the door. The store owner told Harriet to catch him, but she wouldn't. The white man became very angry. He threw a lead weight at her, and it hit her head. She was hurt so badly that she almost died. It took quite awhile until she recovered. After she was well, she started having sleeping spells which remained for the rest of her life. Whenever somebody came over to see if they wanted to buy her, she pretended to have one of her sleeping spells. It always worked.

Figure 3

Harriet was put to work in a field after she had recovered. She worked very hard and was getting strong. But she was always afraid of being sold south. Harriet would never forget about her two older sisters who were sold south. Many families were torn apart, never to see each other again. She learned from the Bible about Moses who led slaves to freedom. She believed strongly in what the Bible had to say.

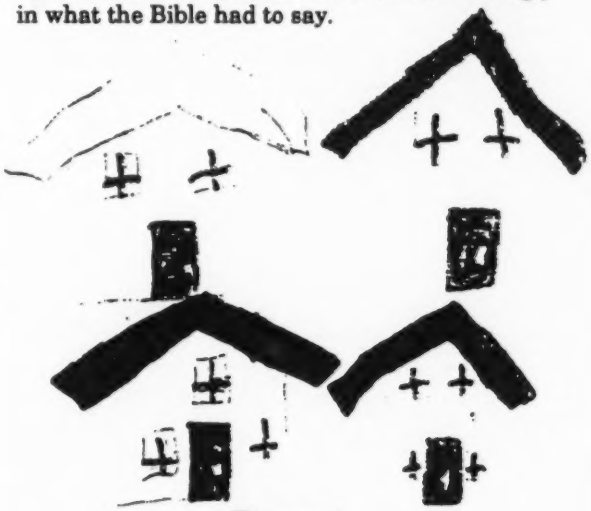


Figure 4

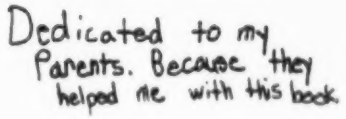
She learned about Nat Turner who must have escaped in the Underground Railroad. Harriet heard a lot about the Underground Railroad. She found out that there was no "train." She discovered that it was really a chain of houses owned by whites who hated slavery. These kind people hid the runaway blacks and gave them food. They then helped them get to the next safe place.

Figure 5

The people who did this were called "station masters." The hiding places were called "stations" or "depots." The people who led Blacks to the other depots were called "conductors." After Harriet heard all of these stories, she made up her mind that she was going to take a ride to freedom!

Tony's interest in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged him to dig deeper into the issue of equal rights for everyone. He chose to do his personal biography on Harriet Tubman, who was a very important figure during the time slavery was in full force. Tony states, "I chose this person because she helped a lot of people. And she helped take care of hurt people in the Civil War. She is a very interesting person" (see Figure 6). It is interesting to note how Tony starts to strongly connect with figures of the past, especially people who were involved in equality for all people.

All students had some sort of emotional tie to the biographical person they chose to study. They utilized their own set of values and beliefs as a bridge to better understand and learn about someone else's values and beliefs. They were able to associate with a famous person who conquered obstacles in order to achieve personal goals and somehow to envision that same power within themselves. Personal choice and ownership empower children to connect what they already know with what they need and want to learn. Educators need to build on that foundation and allow natural learning to be based on and facilitated by students' choices.



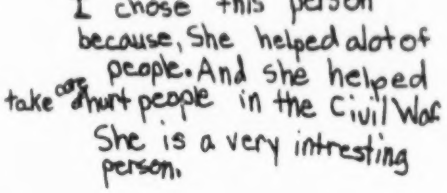

I chose this person because, She helped alot of people. And she helped take care of hurt people in the Civil War She is a very intresting person.

Figure 6

Harriet Tubman—
Dedication Page

Summary

Zarnowski (1990) argues,

When we encourage children to tell a life story in their own way, we are tapping both their language skills and their knowledge of story. We are showing them how to put language and story to work in order to make sense out of a collection of evidence left behind. We are inviting them to share in an intriguing process. When children accept the invitation, history becomes comprehensible, in-depth reading becomes engaging, and writing becomes an artistic endeavor (p. 10).

When students are allowed to exercise choice and ownership in what they read, it is undeniably true that they will prefer reading not only as an enjoyable thing to do, but also as a way to learn. When students are allowed to use oral and written language simultaneously throughout all these areas of the curriculum, it is also true that they will be better able to effectively express themselves in both of these modes. When students are allowed to use background knowledge to learn, it is likewise true that they will not only be able to draw inferences and think critically about what they encounter in print, but they will also be more able to recognize a large body of content knowledge which experts consider essential for informed readers. This biography unit achieved these goals.

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About the Author

Kelli Adams teaches fourth grade at Century Elementary School in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She recently completed a research project in which she studied the personal meanings of children as they read and wrote in the content areas.